She's a great soul, Kate is. Generous and big-hearted, too. Fact of the matter is, I guess I've had more esteem for Sarah Kate Jurnegon than any other female I know. Outside of my mother, that is. Mom's at the very top of my list. She's always been there; she'll remain there forever. But like I said, next to Mom, Kate's right up there.
To look at her, Kate doesn't strike you as anyone particularly outstanding. She's not at all like Midge Finkle: Midge stands out. She's that type. And Midge and Kate are nearly the same age. Or so I've heard. Kate had her 75th birthday in March and Midge had hers the beginning of April. Midge loves the world and its allurements and attractions; Kate loathes it. Midge thinks church-going is all it's going to take to get one into Heaven; Kate's route is "the straight and narrow:" a total and complete death to sin and to self and e full alignment to all the precepts of God's Holy Word.

Yes, I have utmost respect and highest, esteem for Kate. She's genuine. Through and through genuine. I guess one would dare say she's almost like an aunt to me, I feel that close to her. But then, I've known her for all the years of my natural life. She held me, rocked me, and cuddled me in my infant years; a big help to Mom, who had her hands full, trying to keep food on the table and the rent paid as she cared for my ailing and now long-deceased father.

I should not have done what I did; I realize that now. But I did it, and I must say that I learned a lesson. Poor, dear Kate! She's still as sweet as ever and even more kind than ever to me, if such a thing is possible, since the very inner nature of this great old soul overflows constantly with gentleness, goodness, and kindness. Bless her! And, yes, with God's love, too.

Young men are still mere boys at heart, I suppose. But what I did stemmed from a motive other than mischief, wrong as this would have been.

I am into my second year of college here in my home town. Nothing wrong with that; especially not when one's major is in agriculture and he has one of the very best colleges in that field in his own area and home town. Mom rented the house in which we lived from a wealthy businessman. He gave Mom the option to either buy the house or to pay his newly-raised, sky-high rent. Mom could do neither. We searched and searched for a decent place to rent; within Mom's financially-able range, of course, and wound up on zero base. To make matters worse, the place where Mom had worked for years closed down, and suddenly, Mom had no income. The woman in whose little shop Mom had been employed referred her to a friend of hers in another city. Mom made the trip, had an interview with her former employer's friend, and was hired immediately.
"I'm sorry things have turned out like this, Ron," she told me when she returned home to pack her things and ready the furniture for moving, "but I'm convinced that it is God's will for me to take the job. The pay is wonderful, and it's the same kind of work with which I am familiar. There's a college nearby. But Kate would like to have you stay with her. Until you finish your schooling, at least, God willing. . . ."

Mom's sentence trailed; there was not even the slightest hint of a period to it. I knew what the inflection . . . or lack of it . . . meant: Think it over, Ron!

And think it over I did. It didn't take me long to decide, however. I was sold on my college and its super great Ag courses and its practical day-by-day experience. "I'll stay here, Mom," I said. "After all, Kate's like my family."

That was almost a year ago. I continued working and studying, giving Kate a part of my earnings for room and board, much to her distress and protests that I not do this.

Kate's been good for me; she became my surrogate mother. ("I'll keep him in line," she told Mom just before she had to move.) And Kate even said that I was good for her, though how a busy, working college student can be of too much good to anyone is hard for me to conceive or imagine. I'll admit that I've kept her lawn mowed in the summer and the weeds pulled from her garden and flower beds, too. I've also cleared the sidewalks and the driveway and porch of snow and ice in the winter. Maybe in this way it's been a blessing that I've been around. Seventy-five isn't exactly young anymore. Kate is 75, I mean. But I said this before so, in this area, I'm being tiring and repetitious.

Enter April . . . spring. But to be frankly-frank, I saw the first pink-red tips in mid-March, only, at that time, I didn't know what they were. Not then: I'm not up on flowers like I am on corn, wheat, alfalfa, and soy beans and such like things. But when, within a period of weeks, I saw the rows of bushes outside my bedroom windows wearing pinkish, full, round, well-compacted heads, and I recognized them, I made my decision: the peonies must go! I was not going to have an invasion of ants coming into my room. (I had seen them crawling all over those full, firm buds.)
I stood surveying the myriad bushes from my stance inside the bedroom window. This would be a good time to test Kate's steadfastness in Christ, I thought. Not that I didn't know it; I did. Still, this would reveal the real Kate. The inner woman.

I walked to the garage and found the spade; then I set to work. Within a short time the bushes lay on the ground, stacked neatly in piles. Every single peony bush!

I stood back and surveyed the house. It looked bare, somehow, beneath my bedroom windows. But in a way, it gave the house more length, I thought. In looks, I mean.

I was in the process of bundling the stacked bushes and tying them in readiness for the garbage truck when it arrived when I heard a strange sound beside me. Turning, I saw Kate. If I live to be a hundred or more years, I'll never forget the look on her dear, saintly face.

"Ron!" she gasped softly-quiet. "Why did you do that? Those were my peonies!"

I had planned all kinds of answers for her, the main one being the ants; but, seeing the look on Kate's dear face, I remained speechless. Stunned! Into total and complete silence.

"O Ron! Ron!" Kate continued, sobbing by now. "Those peonies came from my dear mother. She gave me the small plants when Henry and I were first married, adding a new plant for each child born to us. They were my mother's gift to me. 'When I am dead and gone, Kate,' she said, 'each spring they will come from their dark earth-tomb to brighten your life with beauty and with the joy and the hope of the resurrection.' O Ron! Why did you do it?"

It was my turn to cry now. And cry I did. I forgot that I was almost six feet tall and that I had broad shoulders. I forgot, too, that I was a man and that men aren't supposed to cry like women. Little matter, that; I cried. Hard. Penitently. And repentantly, too.

Rushing over to my kind, patient, Christ like "surrogate mother," I blurted out the whole wretched story, adding brokenly, "O Kate; dear, dear Kate! I knew all along that you were genuine. Yes, I knew it. This proves it
again. You could have scolded me and..., and even have ordered me to leave here forever. But you didn't. Forgive me, dear Kate, will you? I'll plant each and every plant again and ask the Lord to please let them grow for your sake. And Kate, maybe you'll have enough grace left in your heart to pray for me. My so-called sanctification has never worked like yours has. But I know it will if I go to the bottom, like you have done, and die out to myself and to everything and everybody. . . ."

Kate . . . bless her . . . wrapped her arms around me in typical motherly fashion and said it was worth every peony bush if I'd just go to the bottom and get completely established in Holiness which, thanks be unto God, I did. And I am!

I dug deep holes and replanted Kate's peonies; all twelve of them. Then I prayed for rain. Much rain. And God answered my prayer: we had day upon day of nothing but rain. Needless to say, every single one of Kate's peonies lived. Some even dared my merciless act of death by blooming. Right pretty blooms, too. Kate was as happy and as pleased as could be. And, truthfully, so was I.